

Vijjavimutti Buddhist Symposium celebrating
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The Buddha Tooth Relic Temple.
The aim is to promote Buddhist thinking and its relevance to society today.



Photographs taken by Brother Bill Loh Distinguished speakers, guests and the organising committee



THE SEARCH FOR MENTAL BALANCE AND HAPPINESS

(Part 1 of 2)

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The audience

This article is written in the hope of offering some suggestions on how life's burden could be managed wisely so that it is possible to achieve some degree of mental balance in our daily life and thus be happy. This is essentially a lay practitioner's suggestion on how to weave the Buddha's teaching into secular life, such that one can experience some initial fruit of spiritual success and be truly inspired even while living a lay life. I believe the spiritual journey and self-discovery can begin for lay disciples still caught up with secular demands and responsibilities and still unable to completely quench cravings and other negativities.

What is mental balance?

First, let's define the term mental balance. This is a seemingly straightforward state of mind and yet it is tricky to explain. It is tricky because mental balance is not such an obvious state of mind. It is not an intense emotional state. If anything, it is mild. We usually know when we are severely unbalanced. But for the most part of the day, we can't quite say that we are actually mentally unbalanced, and yet are we truly balanced? If we are truly balanced, surely we must be at peace and happy. But really, are we?

Mental balance is a state of mind which is steady, calm, quiet and unshakeable in its inner core. In this state, the mind is at equilibrium. It is neither restless nor sluggish, neither excitable nor disinterested, neither high emotion nor low spirited. When there is mental balance, the mind is objective, alert, content, peaceful, and unaffected by the external conditions and environment that one has no control over.

Mind of the *puthujjana* is unbalanced

Buddha had called the average man a *puthujjana* (translated as "worldling"). A *puthujjana* is not a lay person per se, but anyone who possesses two characteristics: a) he is trapped, caught up and swept along by sensual desires; and b) he is unable to see the world apart and separate from the "I-conceit" prism.

a) Sense desire trap

The worldling is caught up with and obsessed about the allure of the 5 sense objects: beautiful sights, melodious sounds, aromatic smell, delicious taste and sensuous touch. His mind would happily "repeat-playback" the pleasurable sensual experiences so that it can repeatedly enjoy the memory of delightedness. The *puthujjana* is thus swept along by the tidal waves of sensual bombardment through the sense bases and often drowns in gratifying delight. Hence, the expression – the *ariyas* (namely, those who have understood the Dhamma) have crossed the flood. What flood? That would be the flood of sensual desires, amongst other things.

Conversely, when the *puthujjana* is denied his fulfillment of sense pleasure, his mental state swings to the other extreme and he gets annoyed or agitated or plain furious. How upset he gets would depend on how intensely he wants that object of desire, and how much he craves the desired sense experience.

So the *puthujjana* mind, on just this one issue of sense experience, would swing between the two extremes of *lobha* (greed) and *dosa* (ill-will).

b) Lens of "I conceit"

The *puthujjana* is also caught up with his "self", alternately described as ego or the I-conceit. He instinctively regards everything he experiences as "I, mine, my self/soul/essence". What does this mean? It means he internalizes each mental-physical experience, feels it as unique and special, identifies with it, be a part of it and owns it.

In the *Alagaddupama Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya)*, Buddha said, "The untaught ordinary person" (i.e., *puthujjana*) regards each of the five aggregates (form, consciousness, perception, thought formation, feelings) as "This is mine, this I am, this is my self... he regards what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, encountered, sought, mentally pondered as: 'this is mine, this I am, this is my self.' On this view, namely, 'this is self, this the world; after death I shall be permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change; I shall endure as long as eternity' – this

too he regards as: ‘this is mine, this I am, this is my self’.”

The “I” is a mind-made illusionary concept that feels so real yet it requires, indeed demands, constant and perpetual pampering, assuaging, feeding and stroking, to “feel alive” and “meaningful”. It is so tenacious it grips our mind and demands attention all the time. And yet it is so fragile that it requires the *puthujjana* to expend so much energy pacifying its insecurity and giving it substance.

So, the bottom line is the *puthujjana*’s mind is unbalanced because it is constantly juggling the twin forces of craving-gratification demands and “I-ego” instincts. Conversely, to have mental balance, that inner core of peace and unshakeable stability and calm, one must be able to tame the restless and relentless craving-gratification demands and be able to moderate, pacify and even let go of the “I-ego”. In the Buddha’s Dhamma, the emphasis of the practice is to develop the mental skills necessary to pacify these twin forces of craving and ego.

Methodology to achieving mental balance and happiness

Adopting right perspective/understanding

First, before we get started on the spiritual journey, we have to be convinced that the Buddha’s Dhamma, his observations about the nature of the mind and life’s experiences, about why we experience all kinds of emotional pain, are valid and correct.

Second, do we also agree with the Buddha’s premise that the reason why we are experiencing unhappiness, stress, mental imbalance, etc., is because we are insatiable in our wants? Do we, can we, see that the more desires and demands we have, the more we will feel stress and distress and be less emotionally balanced? In the practice, we have to correctly connect the dots between craving and mental distresses, as the Buddha had. We have to see and understand that the correlation between these two, craving and mental distresses, are direct and proportionate.

Then we have to realize and accept that if we can learn to manage expectations and to moderate craving and wants, our mental distresses and emotional angsts would accordingly diminish. Only when we know how to let it be would we have pain relief and mental balance.

Finally, we must have the wisdom to want to do the necessary to pacify craving and tame ‘I-conceit.’ Essentially, this means embracing a methodology that is counter-intuitive and in that sense difficult to master. Our instincts are to grasp and to want

more, to enjoy and to indulge. But the Buddha’s method requires letting go, being giving, not giving in to anger and managing the ego. The practice is not easy and we must have the confidence, conviction, determination, and discipline to persevere even when the journey feels overwhelmingly difficult.

Right concentration skills

Assuming that we have the wisdom and will to begin the search for mental balance, the next big challenge in the methodology is to be able to see for oneself how the mind works. This is extremely difficult because mental processes move at lightning speed. Worse, we are often caught up in the objects and sense experiences contained in the mental processes that we lose track of the mental process itself.

The big challenge for the practitioner is thus to be able to significantly reduce the amount of mental content arising, so that it is possible to observe how each one arose and fell away. By mental content, I mean sense contact, perception, feelings and thoughts. The observation of each mental episode must be done objectively, without assumptions, without prejudice, without mindless chattering.

How to train the mind to do this?

According to the Buddha, one has to develop two different sets of meditation skills: mindfulness and concentration.

- a) Mindfulness – the skill where the mind is able to focus, observe and track movement and changes. In the Buddha’s methodology, the objects for mindfulness tracking are essentially, the body, feelings, mind, and mental objects.
- b) Concentration – the skill where the mind is trained to be still and to stay focused on one object. Stay put on that object for long enough, and the mind becomes sharp, clear, light, tranquil, objective and equanimous. This is the state where insight into and vision of the nature of the mind can arise.

What are we supposed to be seeing?

The rising and falling away of each and every mental and physical experience, particularly, craving. If one sees craving for often enough, if one becomes so thoroughly familiar with craving, if one remains very objective in observing these craving experiences each time, they arise and fade away, then at some point, the mind would turn away from and get more dispassionate about the experiences of craving. The mind becomes less and less affected by craving. The sensation of craving is thus tamed.

Separately, when one sees how each mental experience is conditional upon the preceding mental experience, one may

realize intuitively the non-existence of an “I” driving mental processes. It may dawn on one that the awareness of a “self” is in itself a conditioned process. This awareness is not proof of the existence of a soul. However momentous that awareness feels, it is just awareness. One may realize that the experience of life’s moments, however special those may be, is nothing mystical and unique. Life’s experience is condition-based and identical for all and anyone with the same cognitive and physiological tools.

Ethical discipline and restraint

Where does ethics fit in the whole practice? In the eightfold path, there is an entire category devoted to restraining action, speech and livelihood. Exercising ethical discipline and observing restraint over speech, action and mind is necessary for the developing of the conditions critical for meditation. As the Buddha put it and I paraphrase: one observes morality practices so that one has “freedom from remorse”. Having a clear conscience is a condition for the arising of joy. Joy is a condition for rapture, which is in turn necessary for tranquillity, happiness and concentration.

Concentration is a condition necessary for the arising of “vision and knowledge according to reality”. (This means being able to see objectively and understand with wisdom the nature of the mind.) With this “vision and knowledge according to reality” as condition, the mind would “turn away and be detached”. Eventually, “vision and knowledge with regard to deliverance” would arise.

Right action, right speech and right livelihood are important to the spiritual practice not just for themselves, although they are important too, but are critical prelude to meditation and realization of Dhamma.

Making wise choices

I call this final segment in the methodology to achieve mental balance “making wise choices”. For many practitioners, even with understanding and even after embracing the rationale for the practice, even when they have conscientiously meditated and dutifully observed precepts and ethical discipline, they may realize really how difficult it is to stay on the path, amidst all the sensual temptations and their own natural instincts. It is a continuous struggle to curb negative instincts and tame the mind. We must have the wisdom to see that we must make the effort not to allow our negative instincts to proliferate unchecked for when that happens, it is going to be very difficult to make spiritual progress and achieve absolute mental balance.

So from a day-to-day “tactical” perspective and in a more life transforming “strategic” way, we have to change. We

must make the right choices that will ensure that our mind is a healthy environment for spiritual growth and not a barren wasteland of negativities.

What are “tactical” right choices?

By “tactical” choices, I mean moral / ethical choices that we make moment to moment, and that surface on a daily basis at any hour of the day. I see \$5 on the road, do I take it? The mosquito is annoying me, do I kill it?

She’s asking a difficult question, do I lie? I am angry, do I vent? This tastes really good, should I indulge? And the list goes on.

These “tactical” choices are characterized under Right Effort (*samma vayama*) in the eightfold path. The intent is essentially to ensure that the mind is filled with kusala (wholesome or skillful) thoughts and be free from akusala (unwholesome or unskillful) ones, so that the mind is a fertile environment for spiritual practice. To be able to have such clarity about the content in the mind at any one time requires very sharp mindfulness. Hence right effort is traditionally parked under the concentration category of the eightfold path. But the intent is the same: to clean up the mental space so that the mind is more conducive for spiritual development and success.

What are “strategic” right choices?

By “strategic” I mean these are choices we make with the correct understanding and perspective about the real nature of mind, and the correlation between mental pain and craving. This is not a moment to moment decision: this is about life’s choices as a result of a way of looking at life and understanding its meaning and priorities.

I choose to do good and do no evil because I believe that these choices will take me closer to spiritual enlightenment. I choose to be generous and giving and knowing how to let go, instead of being caught up in the rat race because I believe this would make me happier. I choose to be patient and calm, instead of giving vent to anger and lashing out whenever the mood hits. It’s a way of keeping my ego in check. I choose to be kind and caring instead of being mean and cruel, which would have been so easy especially if our ego is in the way. The bottom line is I choose to live wisely, to let go, to curb anger, to be harmless, and in so doing, be mentally balanced and happy. These “strategic” choices are characterized under Right Thought (*samma sankappa*) – traditionally parked under wisdom category. Rightly so because it is with understanding and wisdom that we make the right choices that will take us closer towards spiritual enlightenment.

To be continued in the next issue of December 2013.